

GUIDED TOUR NARRATIVE - INTRODUCTION

While most people in Helena, Montana, took a break for lunch on Friday, August 5, 1949, the Forest Service fire lookout perched atop Colorado Mountain, ten miles south and west of the city, was carefully scanning the horizon thirty miles to his northeast over the Big Belt Mountains. His diligence paid off. At 12:28 PM he spotted a thin wisp of smoke coming up over Mann Gulch, in the Gates of the Mountains Wild Area, some of the most isolated and rugged country east of the Continental Divide.

Within minutes of the fire's report, the local District Ranger was airborne to scout the fire. When he flew over the blaze at 12:55 PM he observed the fire burning high on the ridgeline separating Mann Gulch and the adjacent drainage to the south. From its position on the ridgeline, the ranger concluded the fire had started from a burning snag struck by lightning during the previous afternoon's heavy thunderstorms. As the plane circled in the sky he observed the fire had already burned 6-8 acres of pines, juniper bushes and grass, and was burning straight up the ridgeline to the northeast.

The ranger also took time to take a close look at Mann Gulch, this funnel-shaped, one and a half-mile long drainage that ran into the Missouri River's east shore. He saw the pines and firs that carpeted the cooler, north-facing side of Mann Gulch from the drainage bottom to the ridgeline. But later in the day, what the ranger would remember most would be the parched slopes on the south-facing side of the gulch with its thick cover of dry grasses and stringers of young and very old ponderosa pines running from top to bottom.

The ranger had sweated through his share of fire seasons in Montana. Instinctively, he knew that the previous three weeks of daily temperatures reaching into the nineties, without so much as a drop of rain, had made the scene below him potentially as explosive as it ever got east of the Continental Divide.

When the ranger's report of the fire was delivered to forest headquarters in Helena, the decision was made to send two crews to the fire: a local 20-person crew was to go to the fire via land and water, and a 25-man smokejumper crew was to be ordered from their base in Missoula, Montana. However, when the Helena Forest's request for smokejumpers was received in Missoula, the base was temporarily short of aircraft and the Helena Forest was told only one plane, a two-engine C-47, was available for immediate dispatch and it only carried 16 jumpers and their gear. Though it fell a little short, the assistance was gladly accepted and the aircraft lifted off from the Missoula airfield at 2:30 PM; at the same time the temperature in Helena pegged out at ninety-seven degrees.